

NOTES ON BIBLICAL HEBREW

JACK FELMAN

HEBREW AS A SEMITIC LANGUAGE

Biblical Hebrew is a member of the Semitic family of some seventy languages/dialects spoken in antiquity in Southwest Asia from the Sinai Desert and Arabian Desert in the south, to the Taurus Mountains of Lebanon in the north, the Zagros Mountains of Iran in the east, and the Mediterranean Sea in the west. Hemmed in by these natural barriers they remained a single collective. Later they expanded a bit into North Africa and into the East African Horn.

The Semitic languages were all dialects of one large dialect continuum. Over time however, important centers, usually capital cities, became foci of dialect concentrations and thus ultimately languages developed. These are the five great literary languages: Biblical Hebrew of Jerusalem, Aramaic of Damascus, Akkadian of Babylon and Nineveh, Classical Arabic of Mecca and Classical Ethiopic (Ge'ez) of Axum. Akkadian is often termed East Semitic, Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic Northwest Semitic, and Arabic and Ge'ez Southwest Semitic.

Semitic itself is one branch of a much larger superfamily (phylum) of Hamito-Semitic (also known as Afro-Asiatic) of some 150 languages stretching in a band from Egypt through North Africa to Morocco, south to the East African Horn, and southwest in a large area around Lake Chad. Four major branches of languages are noted: Ancient Egyptian including Coptic, Berber, Cushitic, and Chadic. These are all considered sister families of languages related to Semitic.

Biblical Hebrew as noted is considered a Northwest Semitic language part of the Canaanite group including Phoenician and Punic, Moabite, Edomite, Ammonite, Amorite and most importantly Ugaritic with shares not only a common linguistic connection but also a common literary culture. Indeed Biblical Hebrew is termed the language of Canaan (*sefat canaan*) in Isaiah 19:18.

A TYPICAL SEMITIC LANGUAGE

All in all Biblical Hebrew is a rather typical Semitic language although much less archaic than Akkadian or Classical Arabic, for example. Syntactically it does not show anything very distinctive. Scholars discuss a lot with respect to its nominal sentence with no verb, but this is found in non-Semitic languages also (e.g. Russian). Indeed modern linguistic theory claims a universal syntax at least at the level of deep semantic structure. Semantically Biblical Hebrew is very problematic. At the crossroads of cultures and empires it has many loanwords from the great imperial Semitic and Hamito-Semitic languages especially Akkadian, Egyptian and Aramaic. It also has loanwords from neighboring and regional Indo-European languages, especially Persian, Hittite, Sanskrit, Philistine and Greek. The words include names of plants, metals and precious stones, utensils and vestments, measures and technical terms from agriculture navigation and architecture, and military and political administration. Biblical Hebrew also has a very small attested vocabulary, some 7000 words (depending how and if one includes personal or place names). This probably represents some 25% of the language vocabulary. Furthermore, some 2000 of these appear only once in the Bible (hapax legomena) or are troublesome in other ways (rare archaic forms, nonce words and the like). Most (but not all) of such difficulties appear in poetic writings.

Comparative Semitic and Hamito-Semitic lexicons are extensively used to help explain difficult or isolated Biblical vocabulary. A fine example of this is the Chadic form *mt* meaning “man” which is cognate to Hebrew *metey* as in the phrase *metey me’at* “a few people” (Numbers 28:62). Note the group furthest from Biblical Hebrew geographically (and linguistically) shows the cognate etymon. This is very common in language (and culture). Peripheral groups are the most conservative and archaic in their traits. Phonologically Biblical Hebrew too is rather typical Semitic. Scholars note its gutturals, but gutturals are found also in non Semitic languages (e.g. its Indo-European neighbor Hittite, which caused decisive developments in Indo-European linguistic investigations when such Hittite gutturals emerged).

HEBREW MORPHOLOGY AND MONOTHEISM

It is in morphology that Biblical Hebrew as a Semitic language is most noteworthy. All scholars note her ubiquitous trilateral root system of three consonants (including w and y). In pre or proto Hebrew there were many biliteral and even uniliteral roots. However by the time Biblical Hebrew is attested, virtually all roots are trilateral by a series of extensions, lengthening, doublings and analogies (Systemzwang). Biblical Hebrew has the minimum base triad of three parts of speech: nominals, verbals and particles. Nominals and verbals are content words. Particles are grammatical words or elements. Virtually all the content words are built according to the one overriding unifying principle of the trilateral root.

In linguistic anthropology and philosophy it is claimed that languages not only mirror a peoples' thoughts but also direct them in various other non or extra linguistic cognitive domains. It may be posited that the linguistic content system of Biblical Hebrew working under a single concept of the trilateral root aided also in developing the idea of a single formative concept in the religious realm, monotheism. Obviously many factors were involved in developing monotheism. Historical geographical and sociological factors have been posed, but the language factor may be another factor to be considered. Biblical Hebrew indeed is God's Sacred Tongue.

BIBLICAL HEBREW SYNTAX

Biblical Hebrew is the language of one people, the Jews. Although the language closely resembles (in its consonantal and grammatical system) other sister Canaanite languages/dialects (especially Phoenician and Moabite), it was given its characteristic form in the Bible, a collection of 24 books composed by various authors at various times and places over a thousand year period (1200 BCE to 200 BCE). Notwithstanding this, Biblical Hebrew is surprisingly homogeneous and uniform generally, as befitting a rather fixed religious standard and literary High Language (like Classical Quranic Arabic in its time).

There are too many gaps in our knowledge of the structure of Biblical Hebrew to fully determine syntax (again, sadly true for all the world's languages - even English, the most linguistically analyzed language in the world). Biblical Hebrew syntax usually consists of rather short verses, often quite vivid

and powerful in effect not least because of their terseness. Coordination of clauses (parataxis) by simple juxtaposition is most dominant versus subordination of clauses (hypotaxis). The language is generally quite concrete and direct, and so it is not well geared for philosophical thought, most certainly not for any extended amount of time (as opposed to Classical Greek for example). Indeed the language is often very practical and has been said to represent empirical logic (as opposed to the pure rational logic of Classical Greek). Extended outward description is rare as is inner contemplation on the part of characters and actors. Still the text usually flows clearly and well and convincingly enough (as compared to the often rather stiff and wooden sister languages, Akkadian and Imperial Aramaic).

Many weighty tomes and articles have been written on Biblical Hebrew in many languages and by now its phonology and morphology are generally understood (which is true for all languages extensively linguistically analyzed).

Biblical Hebrew is a rather minimalist language. Obviously it has the universal categories found in all languages, but they are not very extensively filled. Thus it has two tenses (perfect with suffixes/imperfect with prefixes), three persons (first second and third), two genders (masculine/feminine) two numbers (singular/plural), no case system (as opposed to Classical Greek and Latin). The language has the universal three parts of speech: nominals, verbals and grammatical particles, but for example, no real adjectives or adverbs.

Biblical Hebrew is a most rewarding language and generally is easier than Akkadian or Arabic for example, and in modern times most certainly the Amharic of Semitic Ethiopia, considered by all Semitists and linguists (a rare fact) as the hardest Semitic language living or dead. Because Hebrew is the language of God, the Hebrew linguist has a Divine mission to fulfill and achieve in seeking to understand every facet of the language as much as humanly possible. The task by its very nature is endless.



Full text of articles from Volumes 1 - 46 is available for download on our website:

<http://jbq.jewishbible.org/jbq-past-issues/>

